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A STATEMENT

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Of the Case of

WM. DEMPSTER, A JUGGLER

WHO DIED

IN CONSEQUENCE OF HAVING

SWALLOWED

A TABLE-KNIFE.

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BY JOHN HADFIELD,  
SURGEON.

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**PADDLEWORTH.**

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## AN ACCOUNT

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**WM. DEMPSTER, a JUGGLER, &c.**

**WM. DEMPSTER**, a juggler, when at Carlisle about the middle of November, 1823, as he was attempting some tricks in a public house, for the amusement of the persons present, accidentally swallowed a table-knife, having a bone handle, the end of which went down first into the stomach. He left Carlisle about the 28th. of December, and travelled in a stage coach to Manchester; came by a boat to Middlewich, in Cheshire; and died there on the 16th. of January three days after his arrival.

I did not see Dempster, until he was in a dying state, his death occurring

in the course of two hours afterwards, but he gave a tolerably distinct account of the manner in which the accident occurred, and of his journey from Carlisle. The following was his description of the way, in which the accident happened. “ Having offered, for a small sum of money, to swallow a table-knife, a new one was accordingly bought from a neighbouring shop. The method, by which I pretended to swallow it, was, to pass the handle, and part of the blade, down my throat, and hold the point of the knife fast with my teeth. When I was on the point of drawing it out again, some person, coming unexpectedly behind me, gave me a smart stroke on the back; the surprise of which caused me to loose hold of the point, and immediately the whole knife slipped into the stomach. I directly made very violent efforts to throw it up, but all in vain; and the endeavours of the Surgeons were equally useless to get it up with an instrument.”

On the day after his death, I proceeded, with the assistance of Mr. Goodall, and Mr. Jump, Surgeons residing in Middlewich, together with my son, to open the cavity of the Thorax, and Abdomen, in the usual way. My first attention being of course directed to the stomach, I found the knife beginning to protrude through a gangrenous opening, about two inches, and a half, from the beginning of the Duodenum, on which part the knife had lain. After having opened the stomach, to ascertain it's precise state, I found, that the point of the knife rested on that part of the greater Curvature, almost exactly opposite to the Cardia, and had likewise very nearly perforated the coats. In the direction, in which the knife had lain, the stomach had become completely gangrenous; and marks of violent inflammation appeared over the whole surface. That part of the Liver, lying near, and a little below the Pylorus, was also gangrenous, but not to a great extent; and some considerable

traits of inflammation existed in the Intestines; and Lungs ; together with very slight traces of it in the Œsophagus.

To enable us to form the best opinion of the cause of these morbid appearances, it is necessary to state, that the knife had undergone such an alteration in the stomach, by the action of the gastric juice, as to have become like a rough saw, with irregular edges, and terminating in sharp points. The handle of the knife was completely dissolved, the rivets had disappeared, and a considerable portion (at least one third ) of the blade also. § What was left appeared

§ The annexed wood-cut of the knife, which is of the exact size, will give a good idea of it's present appearance.

From *a* to *b* is the part of the handle, which was covered with lione, and is consequently less diminished, than any other part. From *b* to *c* is the iron part, to which the steel blade is welded; and the line, where they unite, may be easily distinguished by the steel being so much more dissolved than the iron. The steel part was decreased at least one half, while the iron was only lessened about one quarter; indeed the impression of the letters WARRANTED still remains.





*A Representation of the Knife, which was taken from the  
Stomach of Wm. Dempster.*





exceedingly rusty, and black, but has become brighter by having been frequently handled.

It seems probable therefore, since the knife had remained in the stomach for more than eight weeks, without having occasioned much pain, or distress, that the jolting of the coach ( as Dempster said that he had suffered very great pain during the journey ) had excited severe inflammation, which was probably increased by the cold, and damp state of the boat, in which he travelled from Manchester, for it was in the boat, that he was first taken severely ill.

In the 22nd. number of the Edinburgh Philosophical Journal, for October 1824, there is an account of the treatment Dempster underwent, while he was at Carlisle, with remarks by Dr. Barnes. In this statement Dr. Barnes says, that he was not aware of the alteration, which the knife had undergone in the stomach. It was however distinctly stated, in the account sent by me at

the time to the Editor of one of the Chester Papers, and copied, I believe into almost every newspaper of the day, and some of the Medical Journals, that the knife had undergone the change already mentioned, and that it was the opinion of the Medical Gentlemen present, that if the man had continued quiet at Carlisle, the case might possibly have terminated favorably. By those remarks it was not in the least intended to cast any reflection on Dr. B. or his other Medical advisers, being aware that he left that place entirely at his own desire. Dr. B. complains, and perhaps justly so that no detailed account of the case has been published; but circumstances, which it is not necessary to mention here, have prevented me from doing so sooner; and indeed it was only lately, and quite accidentally, that I saw the journal containing his statement.

## REMARKS ON THE CASE.

I might here conclude, without any further observations; but since it is of consequence, should such a case unfortunately occur again, to form the best, and most correct opinion as to it's treatment; I feel myself called upon to make a few remarks, which I do with the greatest respect to the unfortunate sufferer's Medical advisers; whose most anxious wish it most undoubtedly was to relieve their patient; and should I differ in opinion from such respectable authority, I do it with diffidence, but at the same time with a consciousness, that it is both my right, and duty, to submit my opinion to the Profession; leaving it to more competent judges to decide on the justness of my remarks.

Dr. B. says, that it was the opini-

on of the Medical men of the Carlisle Dispensary, as well as of others ranking deservedly high in the Profession, that it would be advisable to make an incision into the stomach, and extract the knife. He then cites a case, in which such an operation was performed abroad with entire success. The case he brings forward may be true, but we have many almost miraculous accounts of successful Surgical operations abroad, ( for instance the Cæsarean ) which the experience of this country does not bear us out in attaching credence to : and at all events, it is only a solitary case. The danger of such an operation, I should conceive, that every Surgeon must consider as exceedingly great.

The statement of Dr. Barnes begins with an account of a case having occurred, in which a man lived ten years after having swallowed several clasp-knives ; and I believe, there are other cases recorded of persons having swallowed knives. This shews then, that the circumstance

of having swallowed a knife is not necessarily fatal: and forming an opinion of a case, such as Dempster's, I should do it on these grounds; first, that the knife had remained so long in the stomach without occasioning any alarming symptoms, until produced by obvious causes, viz. the jolting of the coach, &c. and secondly, that so much of the knife had been dissolved, as to make it probable that the whole would have gradually disappeared. At any rate, it perhaps would have been separated into so many peices, that they would have passed through the Intestines, and so have been easily voided per anum. In Reid's translation of M. Le DRAN's Surgical Cases, and Consultations, a case is indeed recorded of a Spanish Officer of rank, who having accidentally swallowed a fork, after several months of anxiety, and suffering, at length discharged it naturally, considerably decreased both in weight, and size. The circumstance therefore of a



fork having actually passed through the Intestines, proves, I should think, that there would not be any impossibility in such a body, as a knife, also passing : since, of the two, I am of opinion, that the knife would pass the more easily, on account of the fork being more liable to get entangled in the Intestines. §

From these observations, it will be readily concluded, that I should leave such a case to take it's natural course ; attending strictly to such symptoms, as might arise ; supporting the patient by the lightest nutriment ; keeping him as still, and quiet as possible ; and, I should think too, in a horizontal position, to defend the stomach from the sharp points of the partially dissolved knife. Should an operation be thought desirable, I think it should be performed, as soon after the accident, as might be convenient,

§ For an abridged account of the above case, the reader is referred to the conclusion. It is inserted, as it bears so nearly on that of Dempster's.



before inflammation had been excited, or the stomach injured.

Whether the case were left to nature, or an operation performed, the patient would no doubt be in a very hazardous situation. But, what course it would be best to pursue, will most probably be left to those, into whose hands such a case at some future time may fall. Should however the remarks I have made call forth the opinion of men, more competent than myself, to decide upon the treatment of a case, so novel, and so rare, I shall feel satisfied with the part I have taken, in laying the case before the public.

*An Abridged account of the case of Don John Antonio de Aranda, a Spanish Officer, who having swallowed a fork, voided it some months afterwards, considerably decreased in weight, and size. It is taken from Reid's translation of Le Dran's Surgical Cases, and Consultations.*

DON J. A. DE ARANDA, an officer in the Spanish armies, as he was cleaning the root of his tongue with the sheath of a fork, on Shrove Tuesday, in the year 1715, and rubbing too hard the inside of his mouth, occasioned, I suppose, the Oesophagus to open suddenly, which on recovering it's situation most probably laid hold of the fork, and caused it by it's own weight to drop down into the sto-

mach. He discharged it, per anum, on the 25th. of June following; and although at the time he swallowed the fork, it weighed nearly three ounces; yet after having been voided, the weight was only two ounces, and two drachms.

Soon after he had swallowed it, he began to feel a heavy pain in his stomach, which remained there for about three weeks, or a month; when he was seized with an inclination to vomit: about the time, I should suppose, that the fork presented itself to pass into the Duodenum; for afterwards the pain became less acute, more internally, and lower down. His pain continued at times indiscriminately thro' all the lower belly; sometimes provoking vomiting, sometimes griping, and an inclination to stool; followed by faintings. At length a violent pain fixed for two months in the left Iliac Region, at which place I judged the fork to be obstructed. There were strings of

blood in the stools, which caused very great alarm, as it gave us cause to suspect, that the prongs of the fork were engaged in the coats of the Intestines.

At length the patient broke down, became emaciated, with considerable fever, and his case was considered as quite hopeless. I was even hurried from Madrid ( two leagues distant ) to be present at the opening of his body ; as many persons doubted, whether it was possible, to swallow such a body, as a fork. When I got there however, I found the patient much relieved, with but little pain, and that chiefly in the right Lumbar Region. He soon began to recover his appetite, and strength ; and was quite in a healthy state of body, with the exception of a few slight pains in his back, and loins.

At last, on the 20th. of June, he felt violent pains in the left Groin, accompanied with gripings, and glairy,

bilious, and purulent evacuations, which continued until the 25th. when the patient, going to the close stool, after excessive straining, voided the above mentioned fork, at the same time feeling but little pain; indeed, had it not been for the noise, which it made in falling, he would not have known, that he had done so. On examination, it proved to be the fork.

FINIS.

